

Ihssen's argument is almost a secondary consideration for the volume, however: one of Ihssen's main goals and, indeed, triumphs in writing this book, was to highlight Moschos's monks as accessible and human. As someone who appreciates the wit of the *Meadow*, Ihssen both curates some of the best stories from the collection and writes about these with a great deal of humor herself, especially in the section on visitations by the dead. Moreover, she juxtaposes the stories against modern episodes that offer interesting parallels to the reader, for example when she presents Christopher Johnson McCandless (of *Into the Wild* fame) as practicing modern *anachoresis*. While potentially a little distracting from the historical argument, Ihssen's somewhat unconventional approaches to the material make the *Meadow* feel vibrant and relevant to a modern audience. In doing so, Ihssen should encourage future scholarship on Moschos's text.

As a final note, those readers who are already familiar with Moschos and the scholarship Ihssen references will likely get the most out of her volume. As much as a novice to the *Meadow* would certainly feel comfortable with that text based on Ihssen's discussions, her use of modern scholarship is what adds the most weight and nuance to her interpretations. Those working on the social history of this period should absolutely make use of the rich evidence available in both Ihssen and Moschos's work, but this volume seems likely to kindle scholarly discussion rather than to be the final word itself.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640716000895

Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World.

By **Michael Philip Penn**. Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion. Edited by **Daniel Boyarin, Virginia Burrus, Derek**

Krueger. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$59.95, cloth or e-book.

The use of Syriac sources for early Islamic history has come a long way since 1977, when Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published *Hagarism*. That provocative book drew attention to neglected, near-contemporary sources by non-Muslims in numerous Near Eastern languages, Syriac foremost among them. The largest body of early texts that discuss Muḥammad's fast-expanding movement was composed in Syriac, a literary dialect of Aramaic

that originated in the city of Edessa and was used mainly by Christians. Although those texts have since enriched the study of early Islam, we have lacked an accessible, reliable, synthetic analysis of their content. Michael Penn's *Envisioning Islam* now fills that gap. As Penn points out (for example, 12–13, 105, 186), the book does not cover Christian writings on early Islam in other languages, nor does it engage with the vast (though late) Muslim historiography. It is, however, a stimulating and impressively comprehensive treatment that shows how one important group of late ancient Christian writers represented the new monotheistic movement vis-à-vis their own communities.

The book's main part consists of four chapters, each of which takes a distinct approach to the Syriac sources. Chapter one analyzes accounts of the "Islamic conquests" as evolving, "collective memories" that served authors' agendas rather than revealing events "as [they] actually happened" (6). Here are terse mentions of battles, self-blaming apocalypses, and later chroniclers who attempt to "domesticate" the conquests, invoking them as precedents for inter-communal relations in their own day. Nearly all the early Syriac sources rue the conquests, and are reluctant to describe the conquerors as a distinct religious movement, preferring the slippery terms *tayyāyē* (often translated "Arabs," but left in transliteration by Penn), "Ishmaelites," and "Sons of Hagar."

Chapter two presents Syriac authors' efforts to construct their own communal identities alongside Muslims'. Penn shows that Syriac sources, though diverse, generally "refused to understand Islam as entirely other" (56). They preferred at first to ignore it or present it as a species of paganism or deviant Christianity, belittling the conquerors and bolstering notions of Christian superiority. Chapter three, "Using Muslims to Think With," shows how "narratives of Islamic rulers" helped Syriac authors to "better define Christianity" (141). Muslim rulers could be presented in tones laudatory or hostile, depending on variable local factors. More than one Christian in (fictionalized) conversation with Muslims, for example, argued that Muḥammad knew the truth of the Trinity, but hid it from his spiritually immature disciples. Other authors depicted neutral Muslim characters as referees of intra-Christian squabbles.

Chapter four advances the book's central thesis: that Syriac sources show the boundaries between Christianity and early Islam to have been blurry or nonexistent. The argument builds on trends in the study of early Christianity and Judaism, "the ways that never parted" (10–11, 182), and on Fred Donner's proposal that an "ecumenical," proto-Islamic "Believers' movement" included some Christians and Jews until roughly A.D. 685. Penn, who thinks it possible that such "recent shifts in Islamic studies have not gone far enough," proposes that the indeterminacy persisted "for the next

few centuries,” and thus that “the prevalent image of early Christianity and early Islam as fairly separate entities is anachronistic” (10, 181).

As Jack Tannous showed in a 2010 Princeton dissertation, there is a certain quantity of evidence for such a thesis. Penn presents archaeological indications of shared sanctuaries, and additional, diverse signs of cooperation, interaction, and appropriation. He also finds scattered, recalcitrant evidence of Muslims who engaged in “Christian-like” behaviors, and of Christians who did the reverse, and a good bit more of conversion and apostasy. Yet the thesis is open to question, on at least five counts. First, it elides quotidian contacts (for example, 147) into instances of ill-defined “blurring,” “permeability,” and “hybridity.” A Christian altar that Muslims soil with animal fat is cited for “the movement of a sacred object between communities” (69, 154); a staunch Christian, mis-registered as a Muslim, is assigned an ambiguous religious identity that he doubtless would have rejected (175–176). Why are these cases of the blurring/erasure of boundaries between communities, and not, say, predictable spats between “fairly separate” ones? Second, murky evidence of Christians who occasionally appropriate Muslims’ characteristic beliefs and practices are elevated to “competing visions of Christianity,” on a par with those of clerical elites (for example, 163, 165). Is such a loose and individualistic notion of “Christianity” warranted? Third, the practices Penn takes as evidence of early “fuzzy boundaries” continued long after this period. Thus Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) castigated Muslims for participating in Christian festivals (cf. 165–166). A seventeenth-century Egyptian Sufi composed a “refutation of Judaism and Christianity when he learned that those faiths were considered divine by certain Muslims, who consequently felt it was wrong to call Jews and Christians infidels” (cf. 155–167) (Moshe Perlmann, “Alī al-Munayyar,” in *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica, and Islamica, presented to Leon Nemoy on his eightieth birthday*. ed. Sheldon R. Brunswick [Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, 1982], 182). An eighteenth-century Lebanese Melkite reportedly volunteered to build a mosque for the Muslims of Tyre (cf. 156–157) (Mikhā’īl Mishāqah, *Murder, Mayhem, Pillage, and Plunder: The History of the Lebanon in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, trans. W.M. Thackston [Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1988], 12). Donner’s “Believers’ movement” disintegrates after fifty years, but it is not clear that Penn’s Christianity and Islam ever part. Is his thesis, then, an historical one, about late ancient Christianity and Islam, or a conceptual one, about how any sibling religious communities living side-by-side should be imagined? Fourth, Jews, non-Syriac Christians, Zoroastrians, and others are largely absent here. Were they part of the blurriness, too? If Islam never quite parted from Christianity (or Judaism?), was any religious community ever “fairly separate” from any other? Fifth, the familiar model of early Christian-Jewish hybridity is projected onto the

early Islamic period with scant modification. Early Christianity, however, developed alongside Judaism gradually and intimately, while most Christians met early Islam as the creed of foreign conquerors. Should the model be tweaked accordingly?

The author's opposition to contemporary anti-Muslim discourses in the conclusion, however, is reinforced by the chapter's contention "that religious elites did not have a monopoly on defining one's identity and that lived religious experience was often much messier than what surviving texts advocated" (167). For this and other insights, as for its careful analysis of a great many Syriac sources for the early Islamic period, *Envisioning Islam* is recommended to all readers interested in that period, and particularly in the roles that Syriac Christians played in its construction.

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doi:10.1017/S0009640716000901

Medieval Christianity: A New History. By **Kevin Madigan.** New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015. xxiv + 487 pp. \$40.00 cloth; \$27.50 paper.

I begin this review with a wish that Kevin Madigan's *Medieval Christianity: A New History* had a different title. It is in fact a book about medieval Christianity in western Europe. There were other medieval Christianities, which figure here only very slightly or not at all. A qualifier in the title and a bit more acknowledgment of the global Christian context of his European subject matter would have been in order—especially in a work presented as a "textbook" (xix), given the current trend in the field of Christian history to recover a view of the whole geographical scope of the religion, not least in its pre-modern phases.

That being said, Madigan's book is a substantial and important contribution to the venerable tradition of historical writing on medieval Christian Europe. It stands indeed as a textbook, in the sense of being a comprehensive treatment of that subject, for students to work their way through. But unlike, for instance, Bernard Hamilton, in his *Religion in the Medieval West* (London: Arnold, 1986) or John Lynch, in *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (London: Longman, 1992), both of whom frame their work pedagogically—specifically to make the strangeness of medieval Europe accessible to their present-day students—Madigan does his framing in terms of a specific historical project. That project is to examine the relation of western medieval